

XP AND VISTA SERVICE PACKS REVEALED

With new service packs for Windows XP and Windows Vista just about to be released, David Ludlow takes a look at the preview releases to see what's on offer

Microsoft uses Windows service packs as an opportunity to bundle together all its previously released security and bug fixes, as well as introducing new features. As such, they have always been a big event and many people even refuse to upgrade to a new operating system until the first service pack has been released.

Microsoft has stated that it wants to move away from service packs and focus its attention on trickling more frequent updates through Windows Update. That day hasn't come yet, so Windows Vista and, more surprisingly, Windows XP have brand new service packs available. We downloaded the latest versions of each to see what changes they bring. You can update your own system by following the instructions in the box below.

WINDOWS XP SERVICE PACK 3

You may have thought that Microsoft had forgotten about Windows XP users, but Service Pack 3 (SP3) shows that it's not the case. This is the last major update XP users will see, though, so it's no wonder that this release has prompted a degree of expectation. Sadly, those looking for sweeping changes or even a range of new features to bring XP closer to what Vista can offer will be sorely disappointed.

Rather than introducing lots of new features, SP3 is mostly a bundled collection of all the earlier hotfixes and updates (more than 1,000 in total). This means that, as with previous service packs, SP3 is all you need to patch a fresh installation of Windows XP – you don't even need to install SP1 or SP2 first. From a convenience point of view, this is great as you don't have to download thousands of updates from Windows Update to make your system as secure and reliable as possible.

SP3 also includes updates for both Internet Explorer 6 and 7, and Windows Media Player 10 and 11. This is quite surprising, as we'd have expected Microsoft to use SP3 to force an upgrade to Windows Media Player 11 and Internet Explorer 7; in light of this, we recommend that you upgrade these packages manually to make the most of the new features.

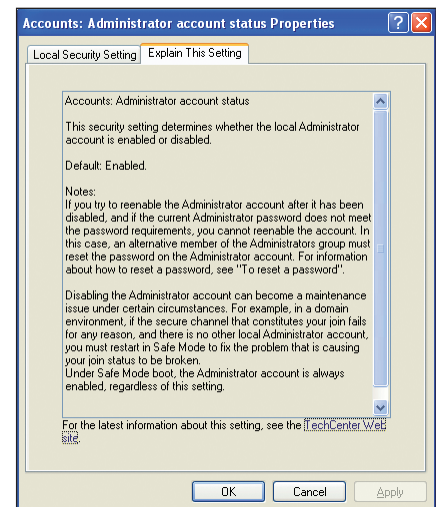
The new features introduced to Windows XP are mostly minor changes to the way the operating system works, and some of them will appeal only to businesses. Product activation has been changed to bring XP in line with Vista, so you don't need to enter a product key during installation when installing from an XP CD with SP3 integrated.

If you've got an older install disc and you want to take advantage of this option, you'll need to slipstream SP3 to a new install disc. We provided full details of how to do this in our *PC Builder* article in Shopper 235, 'Slipstream your XP installation', which you can find in PDF form on the cover disc.

BLACK HOLE SUN

Routers are the backbone of the internet, as they decide which way your traffic should go to reach its destination. As routers get busy, they can silently drop network traffic without warning, making it look as if there's a fault. These routers are known as black holes. SP3 improves XP's ability to detect these, so it can deal with the problem more effectively. This detection is also turned on by default.

If you're running a business and you want to upgrade to Windows Server 2008, you'll be pleased with SP3's Network Access Protection (NAP). This service enables a server to judge a client's 'health' before allowing it access. Home users are unlikely to use this feature, though.



▲ XP SP3 adds more information to security options, but this dialog box is so well hidden that most home users will never see it

Microsoft has added more descriptive information to the Security Options control panel so that it explains exactly what a setting does. This sounds extremely useful, but the Security Options control panel is hidden deep within the Administrative Tools part of the Control Panel, which most home users won't ever need to use. It would have been better to put this information with the tools that most people use, such as Users and Security Center.

The Kernel Mode Cryptographic Module sounds exciting, but on further examination it isn't. Rather than adding Windows Vista BitLocker-style encryption to hard disks, it's an "easy-to-use cryptographic module accessible by other kernel mode drivers". In short, it's a module that other applications can use, and the rumours are that this will be used for DRM.

As far as new features go, that's it for XP SP3. The lack of new tools may be slightly disappointing for home users, but SP3 is still a valuable update. With one download, you'll be able to patch your system fully and make it as secure as possible.

WINDOWS VISTA SERVICE PACK 1

As Vista is Microsoft's latest operating system, it's no surprise that the company has focused a lot of effort on its first service pack, Service Pack 1 (SP1). Vista SP1, like XP SP3, includes all the previous updates, but Microsoft has also introduced many new features. Some applications have been updated and improved, and you can see these changes in the screenshot on the opposite page. Many of the other changes are under the surface, and have been designed to make Vista easier to use and more reliable.

Released into the wild How to get the service packs

Windows XP SP3 is currently set for release early 2008. We'll bring you full news of its release when we have it. In the meantime you can try out Release Candidate 1 (RC1). This is the almost final version that we tested, so there are still some bugs in it. We don't recommend installing it on any vital system. If you want to give it a try, though, you can download it from Microsoft's website (<http://tinyurl.com/2afxb7>).

Windows Vista SP1 has not been released to manufacturer (RTM), which means that the final version has been completed. Final release dates as we went to press were still a little sketchy, but SP1 will be available

around the middle of March through Windows Update and Microsoft's Download Center (www.microsoft.com/downloads).

This version will require you to run Windows Update from the Start menu and select to install SP1 manually. If Windows Update detects any incompatible drivers, the service pack will not be made available except through the website's Download Center.

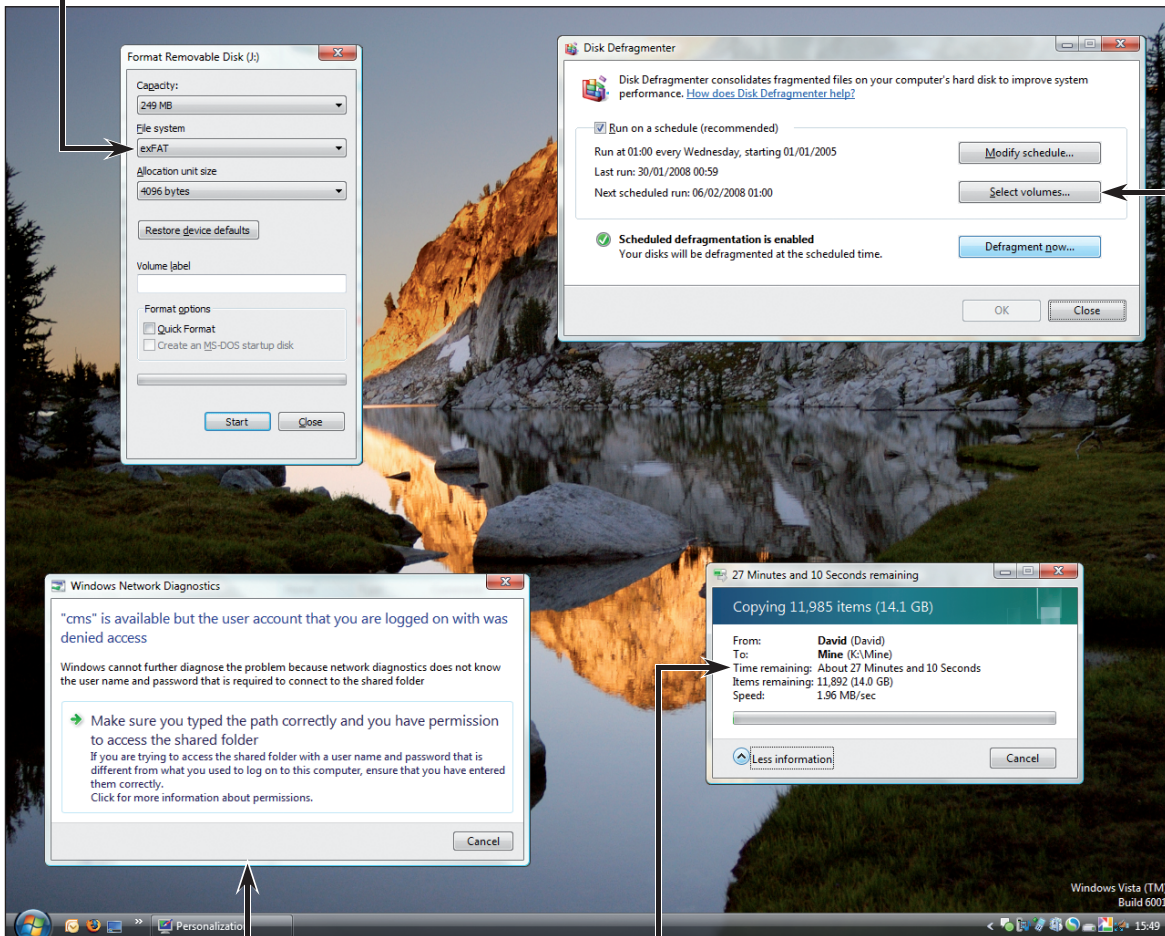
In the middle of April this year, Windows' Automatic Update will automatically install SP1, unless incompatible drivers are found. In these cases SP1 will only be available from the Download Center.



Leaders of the pack New features in Vista SP1

The exFAT file system is now available when you choose to format a flash drive. This allows for drives with capacities larger than 32GB and removes the individual 4GB file limit

The disk defragmenter now lets you select which volumes (drives) you want to defragment. This can save time, and gives you more control over the process



The Network Diagnostics tool can now detect problems with file and printer sharing, not just physical faults with a network connection

Copying files should now be a lot quicker, and Windows spends less time calculating how long files will take to transfer

EXFAT OF THE LAND

As flash drives get larger, the file system they use is increasingly inadequate. Vista SP1 introduces a new file system called Extended File Allocation Table (exFAT), which can handle capacities larger than 32GB and file directories containing more than 1,000 files, as well as removing the 4GB individual file-size limit of the old FAT32 file system. You can format your existing flash drives with exFAT by right-clicking the drive in My Computer, clicking Format and selecting exFAT from the drop-down File system menu. Be warned, however, that flash drives formatted with exFAT can be read only by computers that support this file system.

A major complaint about Vista was that Explorer's file copy was very slow. In particular, it would spend a lot of time calculating how long the copying process would take, rather than just getting on with it. Microsoft has updated this and claims that with SP1, Vista is up to 25 per cent faster at copying files on the same disk, and

up to 50 per cent faster when copying files from a remote computer to a local one. Copying 11GB of data from our PC to an external hard disk was a lot quicker after we installed SP1 than before, as Windows spent a lot less time analysing the files. It's still not as quick as using DOS, though, and directories containing many small files still take a significant amount of time to process.

BETTER NETWORKING

Microsoft has updated its networking support for Windows Vista, making it both easier to use and compliant with new technologies. For a start, it provides full support for the latest draft of the 802.11n WiFi technology. This is likely to be updated again, though, when the standard is finally ratified later this year.

One of the biggest problems with networking is troubleshooting. Vista's network

FURTHER INFORMATION

For a full list of what each service pack includes, see:

Windows XP SP3:
<http://tinyurl.com/323xbq>

Windows Vista SP1:
<http://tinyurl.com/2kvzcq>

troubleshooter was pretty good at detecting and fixing common problems through techniques such as resetting a network card. SP1 takes this a step further and now helps to identify problems with file sharing, such as using the wrong username and password to access a network share. While it can't tell you the correct password to use, it can help you track down the source of a problem.

As with Windows XP SP3, Microsoft has made a number of changes that bring Vista in line with technologies in Windows Server 2008, such as NAP. Again, these updates will benefit businesses rather than home users, though.

SP1, like previous service packs for older operating systems, is an essential upgrade for all Vista users. Its range of bug fixes make Vista more secure, while the application additions and modifications should make it more reliable and easier to use. **CS**